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A critical perspective on education through the concept of childhood

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Abstract

The main topic discussed in the sociology of childhood is whether childhood is a universal and ideal construct, or a construct that is based on changing cultural and historic trends, which represent many different variations of childhood. Another debate relating to this issue is one which questions whether children are actually active-creative subjects, or just objects in the face of structural inequalities that continue to maintain their status of dependency. The purpose of this study is to bring a critical perspective to educational understanding and practices. This paper will explore the roots of childhood from a sociological point of view. Furthermore, it will take an interdisciplinary approach, studying the topic through the lens of sociology and educational studies in order to ascertain a clearer picture with regard to the concept of 'childhood.'

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1. Introduction

Social sciences, including sociology, started to pay attention to of the concepts of the child and childhood, simultaneously. In other words, during the early years of the 1960s, historians began focusing on subjects, accounting for both life experiences and the institutions in which these experiences were realized. As Fass (2003: xi-xiii) stated, family relations, religion and its experiences, education (including formal and informal) and peer groups all became the subjects of interest for historical studies. Alongside these developments, the concept of the child also became an interesting new area of study for many social scientists. During these times, the boundaries among the social sciences started to blur, and the use of particular research tools started to evince similarities among each of the branches of the social sciences. These studies accepted that child and childhood were connected to fundamental institutions, such as the family, education, politics, technologies and a range of social relationships.

2. Child and childhood: A sociological examination

The basic focus areas of many studies related to the child. Many focused strictly on defining what "child" means. Historical developments revealed that, early on, the term child ought to refer to one who is the copy of an adult. This conceptualization later evolved, and the term child came to refer to a being who is a different than an adult. In general, it can be asserted that biological age, some specific physical abilities and psychological capacities are the

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common criteria used to define child and childhood. Today, it is generally accepted that, from time to time and culture to culture, the contents of these criteria might differ.

Child studies were a new area of scientific study at the end of 19th Century. The normal development of a child was the basic focus of these studies. Researchers asserted that this process could be examined scientifically, by the positive sciences in particular. It aimed to identify the best ways of child rearing, entailing particular steps. According to Jenks (2005:4), the concept of normality referred to the adults. Adults were normal, rational and powerful. On the other hand, children were not normal. They were savage, incapable, insufficient and irrational. They did not have any power. By depending on science, these deficiencies could be removed. Although this kind of reasoning was dominant during the 1800s, some followers of this idea still persist today. In sociology, the structuralism approach defends this idea. According to this approach, there is no human subject. Instead, people are determined by the structure of family, culture, the economy and other factors. Since it ignores power relations (refer to the Marxist Approach), and it pays more attention to structure than to human beings (refer to Symbolic Interactionism and the Social Constitution) this approach is widely criticized. A Marxist approach claims that there are power relations in the society, which depend on the tools of production. In spite of this challenge, this approach also accepts the dominance of structure. In this context, the child is seen as a laborer with an economic value. Children are not active human beings.

Thorne (2003:771) asserts that in the social sciences of United States and Europe, there has been a growing interest in the concept of the child since the 1980s. This interest has led to studies, which have determined children to be social actors with their own rights. This argument criticizes the idea of a child as an agent who is going to reproduce. This tendency is different than the ideology espoused by the social constitution approach in sociology. According to this theory, everything in society has values, norms, and rules, which are constituted. People are the producers of children, but they soon forgot this fact. As a result, individuals started to obey and perpetuate the rules and values that predominated. These individuals must become cognizant of this fact. People have this kind of power in themselves. If this cannot occur, then the processes of stigmatization, inequality and labeling will replicate themselves again and again.

3. Children and education: Sociological approaches

Education is one of the basic social institutions of society. It is of great importance, and its ability to form and improve society is one of the main reasons it continues to be part of our culture. Children, as members (active or not) of society, must also be educated. To make this aim come to fruition, there have been a number of different approaches and practices that have been applied throughout history.

Polls (2003) asserts that the perception of education during the 19th Century relied on rote learning, character education, the training of mental discipline and an academically oriented curriculum. In the second half of 20th Century, this approach began to wane. Project learning and practical and vocational training became more popular, as well as the establishment of kindergartens. During these times, there was a debate among educators, pedagogues and psychologists about who was responsible for childhood education. In spite of the arguments that ensued, these groups had some common points. They all relied on scientific knowledge, and they accepted all the children as equal. This argument has similarities to the structuralism approach in sociology. According to Hallinan (2000), Durkheim blazed the frontier of the functional perspective. He analyzed education from a sociological perspective, and his primary concern was the preparatory role of education. This educational focus was meant to transition children into adult society. The focus of his work was on the relationship between schools and other societal institutions, between education and social change and between schools and the functions of a social system. As it was discussed before, adult society was accepted as normal, and in order to achieve and sustain this normality, people were supposed to have been educated through many agents of society. Additionally, Parsons is another important name from the structuralism-functionalist perspective. He asserts that children are beings who are formed by family, school and other social institutions. The internalization of society's norms and rules occurs through these institutions. In the case of deviance, these institutions have the responsibility to intervene. But there is another question that arose from this argument: What are the criteria for normality?

Another important sociologist was Weber. However, he had little relation to education (Hallinan, 2000). Nevertheless, by using topics of his research, such as power and authority, it is possible to show the construction process of power relationships in schools. For example, Weber's work helped to shed light on relationships among educators and relationships between children and teachers. However, it can be argued that he paid more attention to the meaning of social action and the interpretation of individuals. There is still a hidden assumption that is accepted, which posits that structuralism played a dominant role in his work. Therefore, it is possible to assert that in his theoretical analysis can be applied to children.

Marx is a famous name in classical sociology. He was not interested in education directly, but he believed that economic institutions as lower structure dominate upper structure. Education as an institution is one element of this upper structure. According to Marx's viewpoint, schools are the means of transferring the ruling class' values to the children who are going to be the members of the labor class (Wagenaar, 2007). In his view, there is no special place for children, their capacities, or their abilities.

Althusser (1971, 1989), an author of critical theory, asserts that education is one of the ideological components of the state. Through education, children are formed according to the rules and interests of specific groups. Therefore, Althusser, along with other theorists of critical theory, undertake a macro-level analysis, which accepts humans as passive elements of society. Bourdieu (1986) makes a similar argument, stating that education is formed by the cultural capital of a specific group of children. Moreover, this group's academic success is greater than that of other groups. Education, according to Bourdieu (1986) is a tool to maintain the dominance of specific groups. Nevertheless, it is clear that his approach views children as passive agents who are formed through education.

Foucault (1978) also has a critical perspective on this topic. He perceives school, the military and prisons as institutions in which the disciplining of people, including their minds and bodies, occurs. Individuals are monitored, controlled and watched. The boundaries between private and public are blurred. People are dependent on these institutions, which makes children even more vulnerable and dependent. By making a general evaluation about these critical perspectives, Jenks (2005:43) claims that although they critique structuralism in terms of its focus on structural dominance, all of these arguments still accept people and children as agents. However, they still ignore the uniqueness of children.

Other schools of sociological theory pay more attention to the meaning and interpretation of individuals. Symbolic interactionism is one of these schools. It accepts children as active creators and passive agents at the same time. In other words, meaning is interpreted through the experiences of children and the networks in which they are embedded, such as schools, kindergartens and play groups (Bass, 2007). In these terms, children are active members of society. But at the same time, the structures in which they exist, such as the school and the family, heavily influence them. Wagenaar (2007:313) claims that symbolic interactionism assesses how teachers and students define themselves and their social positions. Moreover, it is important to note that the roles, which have been previously defined by norms, contribute to these definitions. The consequences of both of these definitions affect school functions. With this process in mind, there might be some stigma associated with gender and race.

The close relationship between science and policy can also be seen in the area of education. Today's education policies—at both the national and international level—reflect the theoretical debates, which were mentioned earlier. The focus on children's creativity, as well as ideas about equality, have the opportunity to become real via policies and concepts, such as "Education for All", "No One Left Behind", "School for All", "Child Friendly Schools", "Constructivist Learning", "Active Learning", "Diversity-Inclusiveness and Inequality", "Learner Centered Strategies" and "Student Diversities".

The critical examination of these applications reveals that, although they focus on equality and the uniqueness of children, there remains a hidden assumption with regard to mass education, which cannot be disaggregated from a capitalist economy. Standardization, productivity, controllability and accountability are still important concepts in these policy implementations. As Carlson, (2006:91) indicates, all of these policies are progressive. However, their progressivism cannot be disentangled from capitalism. In this sense, it is very useful to use Guy Debord's (1977) concept: Society of Spectacle.

4. Conclusion

In general, it can be said that the studies focusing on children have a relatively short past. Despite their brevity, many debates about the definition of child and childhood have taken place. As Jenks (2005:2) asserts, different factions in both theoretical and political spheres do have convincing evidence to support their ideologies. Education, as both a social institution and as a policy, has been affected by these debates and implementations.

The critical examination of children and childhood education from a sociological standpoint reveals that, in some way, all of the theoretical approaches pay little attention to children and their uniqueness. Similarly, Hallinan (2000) talks about some of the problems of sociological theory when it comes to analyzing education and schools. One of the problems is that sociological theories fail to specifically address the unique situation of schools. As a result, such approaches offer little in the way of understanding the uniqueness of the educational institution in question, as well as its many internal variations. Lastly, using sub-disciplinary approaches, such as stratification and social psychology, a wide range of similar problems was revealed. From these robust perspectives, it is clear that providing an interdisciplinary point of view is one of the most useful ways to create a place for children to foment their creativity.

In addition to these suggestions, Jenks (2003:45-46) proposes three ways to change the perception of children as passive agents, which prevails throughout the tradition of sociology. Firstly, the development of children should be regarded historically, not as a series of evolutionary steps. Instead, their development should be conceived of as a pattern of images that relate to different temporal contexts. Second, children should be studied comparatively by employing anthropological material. Finally, a phenomenological perspective could enable us to gain insight into an existential and generative sense of sociality, which emerges from the consciousness of the child.

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